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PROJECT: HIV Cybermall website, a Collaborative Effort Among 18 Los Angeles-area HIV Care Providers, TeraTechnologies Corporation, SPNS/HRSA, and a Number of Organizational and Corporate Partners in Cyberspace

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ISSUE: Many Americans, especially those outside the main epicenters of the HIV epidemic, lack knowledge about HIV prevention practices and also lack knowledge about how and where to get tested. They also are reluctant to identify themselves as at risk for HIV or as possibly infected. Fear, stigma and shame about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, while much less than in the early years of the epidemic, remain powerful barriers to prevention efforts.

SETTING: Cyberspace. This prevention effort is aimed at the large number of people who are infected, are unaware of their infection and who either (1) do not know where to go to get tested or (2) who are afraid to contact anyone and reveal possible HIV-positive status.

PROGRAM DESIGN: The HIV Cybermall Project, funded by the SPNS Program at HRSA, includes development of the first real-time service-delivery website as one element of the project. The website, hivcybermall.org, is being designed in collaboration with other HIV website developers and marketed to provide a location where people can learn about HIV, who is at risk, where to get tested, what the testing process is like, where they can contact supportive people in their geographic area, and where they can receive socially, culturally and linguistically-appropriate information and services in an anonymous and non-threatening environment. Features include a colorful, clickable map of the United States that is a resource directory for HIV services listed by County, a virtual walk through of the counseling and testing process, Q and A with HIV mental health professionals, on-line support groups, and an HIV library. We are also seeking FDA approval for a home-testing process to market on the site. The HIV Cybermall Project hired a first-rate computer consultant, Deborah E. Gordon, who has designed the intranet and website for the National Institutes of Health and the Army Dental Services. She does a dynamite presentation.

RESULTS: hivcybermall.org has been under development since December. We receive over 5000 visits per week at this point, identified by location of origin of the visitor, what area of the site was visited, browser used, and type of visitor. The site has been featured on CNBC, in a 3-minute spot on Mariette Hartley's "Healthy Solutions", and has attracted a list of top celebrities volunteering to serve as spokesperson for the site when development is completed and full marketing begins. We are working with the National Minority AIDS Council, Microsoft, California AIDS Clearinghouse, AIDS Project Los Angeles, National Library of Medicine, Aegis, Johns Hopkins University, the NAACP, SPNS/HRSA, Mothers Voices and other site developers to create an on-line community for HIV prevention purposes. Ours is one of 1 percent of all sites on the Web that is disability-accessible. We are offering Spanish language services. We are using the site for fund-raising and are becoming a self-supporting location for real-time HIV prevention and other HIV services. We are also working to cross the "digital divide" that limits access to the Internet by low-income and minority populations that are particularly at risk.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Developing a website is a process over time, not over a weekend.
- Creating a web community involves collaboration among many people and many different website developers.
- Developing a large audience on the web takes a lot of effort, but can be done.
- Making significant contact with your target audience also takes effort in design and marketing.
- Cyberspace is an important location for prevention education and communication.
- Expertise in site architecture and marketing are worth their cost.

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